

Wellness Notes

Balance Problems*

(Part III)

Symptoms and Diagnosis

Some people may have a balance problem without realizing it. Others might think they have a problem, but are too embarrassed to tell their doctor, friends, or family. Balance disorders can be difficult to diagnose because patients sometimes find it hard to describe their symptoms to a doctor. Patients may use words such as "dizzy," "woozy," or "lightheaded" to describe what they are feeling. For some people, the feeling can be brief, while for others, it can last a long time, disrupting their daily lives.

Balance disorders are serious. Sometimes they are a sign of other health problems, such as those affecting the brain, the heart, or circulation of the blood. They are also one cause of falls and fall-related injuries in older people. For these reasons, it is important to have a potential balance disorder diagnosed and treated as soon as possible.

Ask yourself the following questions. If you answer "yes" to any of these questions, you should discuss the symptom with your doctor.

- Do I feel unsteady?
- Do I feel as if the room is "spinning" around me?
- Do I feel as if I'm moving when I know I'm standing or sitting still?
- Do I lose my balance and fall?
- Do I feel as if I'm falling?
- Do I feel "lightheaded," or as if I might faint?
- Does my vision become blurred?
- Do I ever feel disoriented, losing my sense of time, place, or identity?

If you think that you have a balance disorder, you should schedule an appointment with your family doctor. You can help your doctor make a diagnosis by writing down key information about your dizziness or balance problem beforehand and giving the information to your doctor during the visit. Tell your doctor as much as you can.

Write down answers to these questions for your doctor:

- How would you describe your dizziness or balance problem?
- How often do you have dizziness or balance problems?
- Have you ever fallen? If so, when did you fall, where did you fall, and how often have you fallen?
- What medicines do you take? Remember to include all over-the-counter medicines, including aspirin, anti-histamines, and sleep aids.
- What is the name of the medicine, how much do you take each day and what times of the day do you take the medicine?
- What is the health condition for which you take the medicine?